

# Alternative Education and the Development of Resilience in Youth Who Have Abandoned School in Puerto Rico

Educación Alternativa y el desarrollo de la Resiliencia en jóvenes que han abandonado la escuela en Puerto Rico

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## Abstract

In this paper we present the practices of Alternative Schools in Puerto Rico that promote the aptitudes of resilience in students returning to school after having dropped-out. The research aims to identify the factors leading up the decision of dropping out of school and the specific practices performed which have made a difference for these students to remain in their new Alternative Schools. Information was analyzed from 10 Alternative Schools in Puerto Rico on the pressing factors that lead them to abandon school. The educational model of an Alternative School was examined to determine the best practices that build resilience in these youth. Among the findings, the leading factors in the decision to abandon school were related to academic failure followed by chronic absenteeism and cutting classes. The relation with a caring adult, significant student participation and emotional healing appear to be critical aspects in developing resilience in this student population.

Key Words: Adolescent Education, Alternative Education, Resilience, Puerto Rico.

## Resumen

En este artículo presentamos las prácticas de las Escuelas Alternativas en Puerto Rico que incorporan técnicas socioeducativas a través de la Educación para la Paz para promover las aptitudes de la resiliencia en los estudiantes que regresan a la escuela después de haber abandonado. La investigación tiene como objetivo identificar los factores que llevan a la decisión de abandonar la escuela y las prácticas específicas llevadas a cabo en la escuela que han hecho una diferencia para que estos estudiantes permanezcan en sus nuevas Escuelas Alternativas. Se analizó datos de 10 Escuelas Alternativas sobre los factores apremiantes que llevaron a los estudiantes a abandonar la escuela. Además se examinó el modelo educativo de una escuela alternativa para determinar las mejores prácticas para construir la resiliencia en estos jóvenes. Entre los hallazgos, los factores más prominentes en la decisión de abandonar la escuela se relacionan con el bajo aprovechamiento académico seguido por razones de ausentismo crónico y faltar a clases. La relación positiva con un adulto, adulto, la participación significativa y la sanación emocional aparentan ser de los factores más críticos en el desarrollo de la resiliencia en esta población de jóvenes.

Palabras Claves: Educación de Adolescentes, Educación Alternativa, Resiliencia, Puerto Rico.

## 1. Introduction

Poverty, marginalization and social exclusion have many manifestations in society. Related to poverty and inequality, social exclusion is a dynamic process that emerges from the relations of power against a group or population. Youth as a social construct, particularly disadvantaged youth as a vulnerable population, represent a group that is victim of social and educational exclusion processes that result in the marginalization of the benefits of a quality of life (Jiménez, 1997).

Adolescents<sup>1</sup> today represent a great portion of the population, however they are not part, or have a voice in, policies that affect their lives (education, employment, health, others). In order to develop a more just society, they must be included in society. It is important to invest in this stage of life aimed at the full inclusion of young people in order to support their desire for «emancipation from their family nucleus and the formation of independent life projects» (CEPAL, 2016: 48).

One of the most devastating exclusions is that of education, manifested through school abandonment. The trend for this population of students, at risk of social and educational exclusion, is that the number of young people abandoning school will, at least, remain constant. The Department of Education of Puerto Rico revealed that 60% of students entering grade 10 will graduate with their cohort in grade 12 high school, so that the official abandonment rate is 40%, the same rate in the last four years (END, 2012). Abandonment remains most acute in grade 10 (14 to 16 years old) which represents the transition from middle to high school.

School abandonment has a direct impact on the possibilities of living in poverty in the future. Completing secondary school (high school) is crucial in reducing these chances, but it is also a «[...] key tool for bridging gaps in social inequality related to other rights, such as health, civic participation and access to decent work, that have implications for current and future generations [...]» (CEPAL, 2016: 47).

Social factors of the school and family play an important role in influencing the decision to abandon school. It can even affect all types of students. The risk culture in which young people live affects their performance, however «[...] students who drop out of school are not necessarily students with less intellectual ability [...]» (Lange & Sletten, 2002: 18). They are risk factors that weigh beyond their abilities and the environment in which they grow.

Adolescents at risk from disadvantaged communities are particularly vulnerable and exposed to great social dangers. The abuse of minors is a prevalent issue in Puerto Rico. In 2013, the rates of abuse registered at 9.6 minors per every 1,000 minors living in Puerto Rico, higher than in the US.<sup>2</sup> The most common cases of abuse are: Neglect (58%), Emotional Neglect (45%), Physical Abuse (38%) and Educational Neglect (10%). Cases

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1. As it applies to this article, we consider adolescence to be school-age from 13 to 21 years old, which is the age of participants in the Alternative Schools.

2. Puerto Rico holds the number 17 position in child abuse within the US jurisdictions. The rate of abuse in these jurisdictions is 9.1 victims per 1,000 minors, less than the rate of 9.6 in Puerto Rico.

of Exploitation and Sexual Abuse increased in the case of minors between the ages of 9 and 11, and 12 and 14 years old (Disdier, 2015).

This group of students coexists in environments in which they may be subject to experience some form of history of abuse. A perception study of the students in an Alternative School and regular middle schools conducted by Moscoso (2008), revealed that students with academic lag and at risk of dropping out of school typically had a history of abuse. The same study approximated that 60% of students who were at risk of school abandonment had also experienced abuse or were currently victims. The victimization of these students makes it highly difficult to remain in school. In personal interviews, the students expressed how abuse affected their school life. They associated their lack of focus on school work, absenteeism, aggressive attitudes, change in conduct and discipline, as well as their low academic performance with the experience of being subject to abuse in the home (Irizarry, 2011).

Adolescence is a crucial moment of human development. The task of the young person during this time is to discover their identity and build a life project based on aspiration, goals, strengths and a vision of the future. This requires a knowledge and clarity about their own values, strengths, weaknesses, abilities which, according to Bustos (2012), «[...] have been put to the test or have arisen during the most difficult times of their lives, such as being abused or neglected by those who should give them security and protection, such as parents or caregivers [...]» (Bustos, 2012:1).

In order for this to come about, adolescent students require a different type of education. Young people understand that an important factor in a positive school for them is the school's attention to their social and emotional stability. A study of students who had dropped out and returned to school via an Alternative School, Nuestra Escuela, (Irizarry, *et al.*, 2006), indicates that the difference for these young people lies in the support provided by the school, or lack thereof, to their emotional well-being. The study reveals that students returning to school (via the Alternative School) are initially not in optimal conditions to enter into a full academic program without first addressing the social and emotional issues that persist in their environment. It is perceived that the challenges in learning lies in the emotional lacerations which inhibits their self-esteem and often results in the student's lacking defined goals for their personal, educational and future work lives (Irizarry *et al.*, 2006).

In other words, it reinforces the concept that in order to learn, the young person first requires an emotional stability in their lives. It also attests to the fact that a school not only teaches, but also educates for life and in the development of the life skills necessary to function as a healthy person.

## 2. Resilience and the School

The combination of life skills required by these young people in vulnerable situations, can be called resilience. Resilience is acquired through an interactive process between the

individual's own capacities and strengths; and the environment. The process of resilience facilitates a change in perspective which allows the person to «redefine» (giving a new meaning or significance) the traumatic situation (abuse, neglect, etc.) thereby generating a change in attitude which allows them to free themselves from the original meaning (significance) given to the trauma (Bustos, 2012). This «redefinition» of the traumatic situation is a turning point since it requires that the person help themselves and trust others. The individual may create a greater sense of hope for the future as well as a better quality of life by the increase in their positive self-perception (Bustos, 2012).

There is a dimension to resilience which entails the time and progression in the sense of the individual's ability developed to encounter future adversity when one has overcome the present adversity. Celinski & Allen (2011) make reference to three primary meanings of resilience which are contemplated on a time spectrum and progression. These are: Recovery, Sustainability and Growth.

Recovery refers to the ability to rebound from a negative impact of stress that manifests as a capacity to quickly regain equilibrium and to return to an initial state of health. Sustainability refers to the capacity to go forward in life; it is defined as the extent to which ongoing purposeful engagements at school, work in family and social life are not disrupted by stressors. Growth refers to the possibility that, as a result of a healthy response to the stressful experience the person [...] developed an enhanced adaptation capacity through new learning that extends beyond pre-stress levels (Celinski & Allen, 2016: 60).

Resilience makes it possible that throughout life, people become capable of «protecting» themselves against life crises by maintaining their physical and psychological integrity, rebuilding when necessary and managing a positive symbolic and behavioral menu of life skills and tools which are guided by positive behavior and optimism (Bustos, 2012). In turn, this approach aids in the development «an internal, personal resilient system within an individual that can address the conflict in their lives in a socially acceptable way» (Bustos, 2012: 2).

There are experiences and dynamics that make young people more vulnerable and also more protected from falling into conflictive reaction to adverse experiences. According to Benard (1996), the factors of protection or protective processes can be grouped into three categories:

a) PROTECTING FACTOR - Feeling Understood and Protected:

*Caring Relationships.* The presence of at least one caring person--someone who conveys an attitude of compassion, who understands that no matter how awful a child's behavior, the child is doing the best he or she can give his or her experience--provides support for healthy development and learning.

b) PROTECTING FACTOR - Confidence in their abilities:

*High Expectations.* Schools communicate expectations in the way they are structured and organized. [...] Such a curriculum is thematic, experiential, challenging, compre-

hensive, and inclusive of multiple perspectives [...]. Instruction that supports resilience focuses on a broad range of learning styles; [...] and is participatory and facilitative, creating ongoing opportunities for self-reflection, critical inquiry, problem solving, and dialogue [...].

c) PROTECTING FACTOR - Shaping their Future:

*Opportunities for Participation.* Providing youth with opportunities for meaningful involvement and responsibility [...] include asking questions that encourage critical thinking and dialogue, making learning more hands-on, [...], letting students create the governing rules of the classroom, and employing cooperative approaches (such as cooperative learning, [...] mentoring, and community service) (Benard, 1996: 3).

These three basic strategies are a powerful combination in developing a «protective» environment in the school for at risk students making them more resilient in vulnerable situations. A groundbreaking research conducted by Grotberg (1995, cfr.: Bustos, 2012) studied the factors that exist in the resilient child, versus non-resilient children. The study revealed that the presence of one protective factor alone does not necessarily promote resilience. It also shed light on a common perception about poverty which is «not necessarily associated with personal limitation and that people who live in poverty can develop resilience successfully» (Bustos, 2012: 2). There are implications from this research applicable to schools which entails that any intervention has to consider a combination of various factors of protection simultaneously. As suggested by the study, one factor alone does not promote resilience.

Resilience can be broken down into various aspects composed of abilities, skills and beliefs (Benard, 1996; Bustos, 2012). These factors of protection suggest a general profile of what a resilient adolescent has integrated into their social and emotional tools. The profile of the resilient adolescent has the following skills and abilities to protect themselves from adversity:

- a) SOCIAL COMPETENCE includes qualities such as responsiveness, especially the ability to elicit positive responses from others; flexibility, including the ability to move between different cultures; empathy; communication skills; and a sense of humor.
- b) PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS encompass the ability to plan; to be resourceful in seeking help from others; and to think critically, creatively, and reflectively.
- c) CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, a reflective awareness of the structures of oppression (be it from an alcoholic parent, an insensitive school, or a racist society) and creating strategies for overcoming them.
- d) AUTONOMY is having a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one's environment, including a sense of task mastery, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy. The development of resistance (refusing to accept negative messages about oneself) and of detachment (distancing oneself from dysfunction) serves as a powerful protector of autonomy.
- e) OF PURPOSE and a belief in a positive future, including goal direction, educational aspirations, achievement motivation, persistence, hopefulness, optimism, and spiritual



connectedness (Rodríguez, 2009, cfr.: Bustos, 2012; Warner & Smith, 1992, in Benard, 1996).

In addition to these abilities and beliefs important in developing resilience, Grotberg (1999) adds additional factors: Trust, Initiative and Industry. According to the author, these factors are based on the first five developmental stages of life (Erikson, 1985, in Grotberg, 1999) and «contribute to a youth's ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, or even be transformed by experiences of adversity» (Grotberg, 1999: 3). The development of these factors incorporates a paradigm of resilience in the context of Adolescence:

- Trust: It may be defined as believing in and relying on another person or thing. Adults can achieve this by being reliable, by respecting each person, by not betraying confidences, and by accepting youth as valued and important people.
- Initiative: It may be defined as the ability and willingness to take action. When students face adversity, they are strengthened when they are willing and able to take the initiative for finding creative responses.
- Industry: It may be defined as working diligently at a task. (Being able to demonstrate competency and expertise) (Grotberg, 1999: 4-11).

The profile of the resilient adolescent together with the consideration of the building blocks of resilience in the context for adolescence, make the work of the school a challenging one. The school must then focus on these elements to aim at developing the resilient adolescent through its structural, operational, curricular and service components. In the next section, we will explore the case of one Alternative School which has focused on building resilience with significant results.

### 3. Alternative Schools and the CASA Project

The Centros de Apoyo Sustentable al Alumno (Center for the Sustainable Support of Students), known as the CASA Project was established by the Government of Puerto Rico, through the Puerto Rico Department of Education in 2005. They are approximately 14 Alternative Schools under the CASA Project. The schools are nonprofit organizations that assist students, 15 to 21 years old, who have left the public school system, for more than six consecutive months that return to school to obtain their high school diploma.

Alternative Schools represent the «bridge» towards inclusion and participation for students who have abandoned school. The Alternative Schools aim at enhancing the social and emotional factors that affect the learning process, essential for teens, by creating inclusive learning communities. As described by the DEPR,

Alternative Schools [...] encourage student retention; develop social skills, self-management in order to contribute positively to society; and assist students in achieving personal and academic self-realization through non-traditional methods [...] (DEPR, 2014: 1-4).

The Alternative Schools are characterized by varying the teaching and learning methods, providing tutoring and academic support, working in trimester or school modules, supporting their children and family, and biopsychosocial support to foster the personal improvement, cultural identity and social entrepreneurship (AEA, 2013). The practices applied by the Alternative Schools are a solid base for the social integration and academic work of students. However, there is a lack of uniformity in the application of some of these strategies throughout the Alternative Schools which dilutes the efforts. In contrast, by placing the building of resilience as an over-arching strategy which will help guide the school's operation, structure and services, the results will be the strengthening of resilience, not only in these adolescents, but in the entire school community.

This study focuses on the Alternative Schools because they represent a vital educational institution, if not the only one, to attend to young people who have confronted situations of adversity, and who have experienced a change in their lives which brought them back to school. In addition, these schools, by definition, provide alternative experiences which are focused on the wellbeing of these vulnerable youth. This makes them particularly apt to emphasize resilience.

Schools can be considered as spaces where resilience is manifested. Alternative Schools should incorporate the building of resilience into their strategies since they are learning environments where students bring their difficulties and challenges and the adults in the schools have opportunities to model the positive skills reflective of resilience (Bustos, 2012). Regular schools of the education system also face this challenge with students who may not be in vulnerable positions. However, the building of resilience in the students of the mainstream schools should also be a priority as a means of preventing school desertion.

#### 4. The Case of Nuestra Escuela: Example of an Alternative School that Builds Resilience

This study focuses on the Alternative School Nuestra Escuela<sup>3</sup> because the school has implemented specific strategies to build resilience in their students, teachers and community with significant outcomes. The model they have developed is a result of years of research, international visits, a rigorous teacher recruitment system as well as a documented system of trial and error. In particular, the study focuses on strategies utilized in the curriculum, teaching and learning styles and opportunities for students to develop autonomy and industry, as well as promote self-knowledge to heal emotionally as part of their learning process.

The school founded in 1999, is based in Caguas, a medium-size city outside of San Juan, Puerto Rico, and has three campuses. This school has understood resilience as a means to overcome existing setbacks and challenges they face in order to become conscious of their personal and social strengths.

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3. Nuestra Escuela, although considered an Alternative School, does not currently participate in the CASA Project.

Nuestra Escuela utilizes a personalized approach to the students' academic work since the objective is to develop each student integrally considering their level of skills, attitudes and interests (Irizarry, *et al.*, 2006). The school, a recipient of awards<sup>4</sup> and subject of various research studies,<sup>5</sup> for their work with out of school youth which has consistently focused on building resilience through the act of Love.

Nuestra Escuela applies a social education approach to create the culture of peace and resilience in the school. This aims to incorporate the teaching and administrative staff in a continuous improvement process which applies to the development of the curriculum modules, the review of each student's progress plan, and where teaching practices and administrative decisions are continuously evaluated in order to be consistent with the environment of Love that they wish to maintain (López, 2007).

In general, the results of the student's experience in Nuestra Escuela are positive. Nuestra Escuela has a retention rate of over 95 percent. The student's attendance is also over 90%. Most students graduate to continue to post-secondary and university studies, or join the labor or business market (Irizarry *et al.*, 2008).

The study compares the care and attention provided to students during difficult personal moments when faced with adversity in the regular school and Alternative School Nuestra Escuela. The students revealed that those who provided the most support when faced with adversity in the regular school were: peers (38%), social worker (36%) and teachers (34%); While in the Alternative School, they indicated that it was: mostly the school principal (98%), teachers (95%), and social workers (93%) who provided them with more support (Irizarry *et al.*, 2008).

The students participating in this study reported having a relationship with the teachers of the Alternative School that allows them to deepen their confidence in the professional adults of the school, to request and receive the academic help they need, to respect the communication channels between the members of the school and the families of the students, enjoy an atmosphere of respect and student participation in the life of the school. The students were asked specifically about the actions in which the school and teachers helped them in their socio-educational skills (Irizarry, *et al.*, 2008: 45-46). The students reported the following:

- «I can tell them my problems [...]»
- «They [teachers...] are interested in knowing my concerns [...]»
- «[They...] worry about my grades [...]»
- «There is respect and good communication [...]»
- «[The school administrators and teachers] meet with my parents [...]»

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4. In 2004, the school received the "Schools that Make Schools Award" given by the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture.

5. Several studies and reports have been developed by education researcher, Dr. Rafael Irizarry which have contributed to the dissemination of this alternative education model and its effort to foster resilience in out of school youth in Puerto Rico.



## 5. Methodology

The methodology utilized in this study is a non-experimental descriptive analysis and documental analysis of the CASA Project and the Alternative School Nuestra Escuela. The study proposes to explore the reasons students abandoned school and which of these are related to factors of protection and risk and resilience.

The study also analyzed several reports and studies on Nuestra Escuela Alternative School, model and results, in order to identify the Best Practices towards building of resilience and its influence on students who have been affected by adverse situations, in the school and in the home.

The objectives of this study are the following:

- Establish the factors that played a role in the decision to drop out of school for the student population in the CASA Project. The study proposes to identify the emotional and social elements, symptoms or causes that the students identify as important in their decision to leave school, as reported in the CASA Project data.
- Determine the Best Practices carried out by the model Alternative School Nuestra Escuela which are designed to create the protective factors of resilience in the students. The study poses to understand how one school has addressed the need to build resilience in the students as a way of intervention and prevention.

The analysis of a survey of 10 Alternative Schools will help determine the working factors in the decision to abandon school for students of the CASA Project. The study is limited to the data available for the academic year 2014-2015. In the case of Nuestra Escuela, two reports (Irizarry, 2008; Irizarry 2011) two original studies (Moscoso, 2008; Irizarry, *et al.*, 2006) and one Master's thesis (Irizarry Quintero, 2012) were analyzed to determine the Best Practices of the school.

### 5.1. Sample

The study of the CASA Project analyzed the data of 10 Alternative Schools<sup>6</sup> which represent 1,170 students participating in the project during the 2014-2015 school year. These 10 Alternative Schools in the sample have an average of 11 years in existence and most are located in marginalized communities. Of the 14 Alternative Schools, 10 schools responded making the response rate 71%.

### 5.2. Instruments

To obtain the information, a self-reporting form was distributed to each school principal, director or CEO of the Alternative School. The survey was based upon a report these schools present to the CASA Project on a yearly basis. The form was supplemented

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6. Nuestra Escuela is not included in the data collection for this study.

with additional questions provided by the author to complement the information. To the original form, items were added regarding the problems faced at school, conditions that persist once the student is in the Alternative School and innovative practices that teachers carry out in the classroom. The 13 item-survey was sent to the school principals, with the written permission of the CASA Project, and the responses received via email.

The survey has two parts: Student Education Information and School Data and Teacher Practices. The following information is sought from the survey:

1. Student Education Information.

- a. Sex
- b. Age
- c. Grade in which the Student Abandoned School
- d. Geographic Zone where the Student Lives
- e. Number of Students that Receive Government Aid
- f. Current Student Needs (housing, health issues, family situation, etc.)
- g. Problems Presented at the Regular School (academic failure, bullying, etc.)
- h. Personal Interests (trained employment, self-employment, university studies, etc.).

2. School Data and Teacher Practices.

- a. Number of Active Students Registered.
- b. Retention.
- c. Attendance.
- d. Candidates for Graduation (May 2016).
- e. Teaching and Learning Strategies Utilized in Class (Research, Group Projects, Community Service, Field Trips, etc.).

For the purpose of this paper, the study was carried out based on the answers provided to item 1g. which seeks to identify the problems presented at the regular school before the student registered at the Alternative School. The schools could mark more than one answer. The total responses on this item were 1,802.

## 6. Results

An analysis of the survey of the Alternative Schools in the CASA Project shows collective demographic and student information about the participating students and schools. The 10 Alternative Schools average 117 registered students per school, per year. And will have graduated an average of 48 students per school for the year 2014-2015.

As seen in Table 1., data indicates that there are 1,170 students enrolled in these schools, and they correspond to 768 males and 402 females. This percentage is higher than the national average, yet it still corresponds to the representation of over 51% of males in the student population of the general education system (Disdier, 2013).

The students have an average age of 17 years, making them minors as defined by State law. Most of the students entered CASA in ninth grade of high school, corresponding to the years between 14 and 16 years of age. These grades correspond to the intermediate school level of the system. This reinforces the previously mentioned finding in the report of the Commission for Adolescent Education, which states that the critical years of socio-educational intervention for school dropout prevention should be at the middle school level (FCPR, 1996).

The majority of these young people live in urban areas (55%) in or near the large cities of Puerto Rico. This may be an indicator of a risk factor due to the higher incidence of exposure to activities of violence usually experienced in city centers. As reported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 84% of children and young people live in high poverty zones in Puerto Rico (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015).

A high percentage of students indicate that their academic goal is to continue on to University Studies (42%) and Technical Studies (33%) after graduation. Given the option of choosing between university studies, post-secondary studies, skilled employment, business employment or self-employment or high school diploma, a significant percentage chose university studies and post-secondary or technical studies in second place (33%). Students who wish to continue onto to technical studies and university are 75% of the sample.

A total of 68% of the participants receive government aid (food supplement) which indicates that a large percentage may live below the poverty line (household income of 50% of the annual average).<sup>7</sup> This represents a figure higher than the national average, considering that 57% of children and young people in Puerto Rico are estimated to live in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015).

Table 1. Demographics and Interests of the Student Population of the CASA Project

Descriptive Factors		Total
1.	Sex	M 768 F 402
2.	Average Age	17 years
3.	Grade in which students left the school system	Ninth 37%
4.	Place of Residence	Urban 55% Rural 46%
5.	Personal Interests University studies 42% Post-secondary studies 33% Trained Employment 29% Others: (Business related employment or Self-Employment, Secondary School Diploma Degree, Army, etc.)	University Studies
6.	Percentage of students that receive government aid	68%

Source: Survey administered to the CASA Project, 2014-2015, DEPR.

7. Approximately 46% of the population of Puerto Rico lives in poverty. Source: www.census.gov 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Profile.

The data collected, as seen in Table 2, includes the factors that the students determined were the most pressing in their decision to leave school. In the traditional school, young people faced situations and problems that led them to manifest the following behaviors leading to abandonment, listed here in descending order of mean percentages: Academic Failures (54%), may indicate that the student was not at the academic level to face the content presented in the regular school, while there are gaps and lags not attended until the student reaches the intermediate level when the content of the subjects gets increasing more complex, learning difficulties arise at this level, which depends on the quality of the academic support services offered by the school of origin; Both class absenteeism or «cutting classes» (22%) and Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy (22%) are symptoms of student dissatisfaction, boredom, and demotivation are life situations of adversity that need to be addressed before the student can focus on their studies and have a direction in their life.

Table 2. Factors in School Abandonment by Average Student Response

Factors in School Abandonment (in descending order)		
Factors	Number of Students	Percentages
1. Academic Failure	640	54%
2. Cutting Classes	265	22%
3. Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy	261	22%
4. Boredom and Lack of Pertinence	201	17%
5. Learning Difficulties	139	12%
6. Conduct and Behavior Problems	96	8%
7. Peer Pressure	49	4%
8. Peer Conflict	40	3%
9. Legal Problems	27	2%
10. Victim of Abuse, Bullying	24	2%
11. Unwanted Pregnancy	23	2%
12. Conflict with the school administration	14	1%
13. No schools available in their geographic location	6	.5%
14. Illegal substances (Sale or Consumption)	4	.3%
15. Violence	4	.3%
16. Others: Moving to USA, Lack of motivation, stressing life events, close of school closings.	9	.7%

Source: Survey administered to CASA Project, 2014-2015, DEPR.

Others factors, in this second tier category, in descending order of mean percentages include: Lack of Pertinence and Boredom (17%) this is an interesting classification as

this would serve as the most important category under which other behaviors can be categorized and understood. The lack of Pertinence, lack of belonging and boredom are elements under the control of the school which require creating an environment of inclusion and opportunities for student participation and can make the difference for the educational experience. Pertinence can apply to the curriculum in themes of providing elements and topics of interest and challenge. And Boredom implies a lack of engagement, socially and academically with the school experience. Learning Difficulties and problems (12%) surface and it is at the school's disposal to assist in the management of the appropriate diagnosis so that they receive the necessary therapeutic attention. The items of Conduct and Behavioral Problems (8%) may correspond to a failure to have a sense of belonging to the school which may result in a student's isolation and lack of life skills or resilience which, in effect, may have influenced their decision to leave school.

Additional factors are present in their decision to abandon school. The factors found, in a third tier category of priority, are related to conflicts: with peers, authority and others. In Table 3, the data reveals that the categories of Behavior and Conduct Problems (14%) can account for the student's internal resources to manage conflicts and little orientation as to the resolution or mediation of conflicts. Most problems of conduct can be understood as continuous disagreements and resentments toward the rules established by the school. In the categories of Group Peer Pressure (4%) we can assume that there are friends, former classmates, acquaintances in the community and family members who have left school and are of influence in the life of the student. Their presence or example can be an aggravating factor which undermines the importance of school. The category of Conflicts with Peers (3%) is related to the Behavior and Conduct Problems since their aggressive attitudes can isolate them from peers, as well as school staff and figures of authority.

The factors of Violence, Bullying, Unwanted Pregnancy and Legal Problems (2%) correspond to a lesser mean percent of response. These are important factors, nonetheless are not represented as frequent factors for this sample of students. In the least represented category are the Conflicts with the School Administration (1%) and Illegal Substances (Sale or Consumption), No Schools Available in their Geographic Location which are placed in the last category of priority (.5%) for this sample of data.

In the case of Violence and Victim of Abuse, Bullying these items are not considered independently. In Table 3 the data represents that for two factors the mean was 1 and 3 schools, respectively, reporting these phenomena. This data may be underreported or not detailed sufficiently for a deeper analysis. In the case of the item Victim of Abuse, Bullying, the data is not disaggregated and therefore does not provide details of each item. There are multiple agencies that monitor bullying and violence in the schools. In the case of bullying, the data for 2013 in Puerto Rico revealed that 17.3% of high school students had been bullied in school (10.6%) and accosted via the internet (6.7%) (Disdier, 2015). The sample of this study reveals that this may be significant in the student population of the Alternative Schools yet it may not be a resounding factor that may be the single cause of their abandoning school.



Table 3. Factors in School Abandonment by School Response

Factors	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Max.	Min.	Mode	25 %	75 %
1. Academic Failure	71	49	55	146	13	13	42	105
2. Illegal Substances (Sale or Consumption)	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	1
3. Violence	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	2
4. Victim of Abuse, Bullying	3	3	2	7	1	1	1	6
5. Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy	33	49	13	150	5	6	6	35
6. Unwanted Pregnancy	3	3	2	8	0	0	0	6
7. Cutting Classes	38	53	6	144	0	0	2	60
8. Learning Difficulties	17	25	10	78	0	0	4	17
9. Behavior & Conduct Problems	14	22	2	61	0	1	1	22
10. Legal Problems	3	3	3	8	0	0	0	5
11. Conflicts with the School Administration	2	1	2	4	0	1	1	3
12. No schools available in their geographic location	1	2	0	5	0	0	0	1
13. Lack of Pertinence and Boredom	29	30	17	75	0	0	2	61
14. Group Peer Pressure	8	18	1	44	0	0	0	4
15. Conflicts with Peers	6	9	3	24	0	0	0	9

Source: Survey administered to CASA Project, 2014-2015, DEPR.

## 7. Discussion

The complex decision to abandon the school system is one that is progressive and multi-dimensional. Through the study of the CASA Project data, we obtain a general perspective on the factors that play a role in the student leaving school at that time in their lives. Taking this into consideration, the data reveals certain factors that are key in the decision-making process of students. However, what is customarily understood to be prominent factors in this decision, such as pregnancy, bullying and others, are not ranked as important as other factors. The data revealed that the top three key factors include: Academic Failure (71%), Cutting Classes and Truancy (38%), and Chronic Absenteeism (33%).

The data provides information on the type of conflict, situation or circumstance that unleash the factors that drive young people to drop out. If we observe closely, most of these events are outside of their immediate control as minors, but they are familial circumstances that leave them devoid of tools and solutions to address the situations. A majority of the factors, 70%, found in the CASA data, correspond to the student's emotional state and stability in the home. Factors related to the emotional state of the young

include the family situation, negative social environment in the home, and substance abuse, account for 40% of the factors described. Factors related to family stability include the economic situation, lack of transportation and the need for housing, account for 30% of the factors described. This finding is consistent with information from the Puerto Rico Planning Board, which indicates that 56.4% of those who drop out of school do so because of problems at home (Junta de Planificación, 1976, in Marrero, 2009).

It is common to associate the lives of young people with the use and abuse of controlled substances, drugs and alcohol. Whether they are involved in the use of drugs, or in its sale or distribution, a concrete association is made between young people and drugs. Nevertheless, the drugs item is only present as a minor priority (1%) compared to other factors such as Boredom (29%) and Learning Difficulties (17%).

The data analyzed corresponds to the experiences lived in the regular public school. However, many of these risk factors and situations persist in the everyday lives of students. Students may continue to live in homes and communities where the risk factors aggravate their academic situation and may counteract the benefits of resilience developed in the Alternative School. Therefore, it is important for Alternative Schools to continue to develop resilience in their students in a daily fashion. The experience of the Alternative Schools in building resilience in students is a strategy that must accompany the education process of students that have abandoned school, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the case of the Best Practices that Nuestra Escuela exemplifies, it is worth highlighting the following efforts in curriculum development, self-exploration and services. As well as the focus placed on mental health and well-being.

The academic work of the students in Nuestra Escuela emphasizes «[...] accomplishment and no student ever fails [...]» (Irizarry *et al.*, 2006: 7). The school promotes resilience by having students be industrious and productive in reconstructing their lives around a clear sense of identity, autonomy and greater purpose to their lives. Academic work is put into a life perspective which means that learning is for life and the development of skills for life.

Nuestra Escuela places the student in the levels and grades where their academic work is at the most appropriate personal level of competencies and skills. In their analysis of incoming students, the school found that there was little equivalency between the student's skill level and their grade in the regular school. In addition, learning difficulties and social challenges are inaccurately diagnosed and therefore not treated or intervened appropriately. To correct this, the school established the Center for Student and Family Support to manage diagnostic academic tests; as well as tests of self-esteem and vocational interests to define the student's occupational goals and documents a social history with an assessment of their family and community environment. A strategic individual plan for each student is created. This provides the student with the assurance that the school will recognize his or her individuality, understand their home and community situation, as well as the assurance that the services and orientation will be afforded with their particular situation in mind (López, 2007).

A key strategy in developing resilience is the development of the curriculum. The effect of the curriculum, (in content and structure) establishes a learning environment which lowers the stress level that the students have with regard to the customary evaluations and grades. The effects of the social and emotional support changes student self-perception as well as healing personal situations which may stand in the way of their emotional progress.

As posed by Benard (1996), the curriculum is a tool by which to set the expectations for quality and persistence, as well as the opportunity to explore the student's talents and abilities. The curriculum is also a protective factor in resilience if it can be «[...] thematic, experiential, challenging, comprehensive, and inclusive of multiple perspectives [...]» (Benard, 1996: 3).

The school's curriculum consists of modules, produced by the school, which are based on «integrating themes» (some based on the student's interests). These are created by teachers with technical support from local universities. The themes allow for interdisciplinary exploration of the topics across various subjects and facilitating student learning that is based on projects. The general framework for the curriculum is based on the Department of Education's general student competences to be developed for each subject: Language Arts (Spanish), Mathematics, English, Science, among others subjects offered by the school. It is an ongoing research project onto itself, since the teachers are constructing the curriculum and continuously improving it alongside the students (López, 2007: 7).

Teachers focus their effort on having the students understand the material and in answering their questions. In that way, assuring the student is not creating academic gaps. This may take time and the schedules can be adjusted to each student's «learning rhythm». They are tested and re-test until the material is fully learned. Evaluation of the student does not penalize them for the time they take to complete a task. They work in small groups, thereby making the learning experience one that is more intimate and where mistakes can be made within an environment of trust.

Others ways in which Nuestra Escuela promotes the construction of resilience in students are by promoting self-exploration and reflection on their academic and personal practice. The self-improvement workshops and volunteer service in the community is designed to foster autonomy, identity, problem solving and social competence. Before students begin school in Nuestra Escuela, they are required to participate in the three-day self-improvement workshop. Its aim is to begin to address social and emotional difficulties in their lives and to establish long-term goals. Family members participate as well, and their participation is required. The workshop has the effect of channeling their resentment and frustration with the school (due to their previous school experience) into positive energies geared towards achieving their goals. As described by Irizarry, when the school addresses the emotional aspect of the student's life and provides the proper channels and activities by which the students can voice their concerns and dilemmas,

[...] it has the effect of deflating their animosity towards their family nucleus [...] and achieves a greater peace in the student's defiant attitude towards school authority, sym-

bolic and structural, and civil society. At the same time, discussing and clarifying their life goals allows them to focus more on [...] completing academic studies in order to achieve those goals (Irizarry *et al.*, 2006: 7).

According to Bustos (2012), students have to find meaning and become sensitized about the trauma or the situation that they have lived and from that point forward, build a life project. This workshop provides that opportunity for students. It creates an environment of trust and emotional connection between students and teachers. Upon knowing the students better, teachers are more sensitive to the students, increase «[...] their solidarity with their family [...] [and] are more attentive to identify the student's moments of crisis that require special attention» (Irizarry, *et al.*, 2006: 7).

In order to foster the students' abilities to develop a sense of purpose and identity, each student participates in Nuestra Escuela's work opportunities and community volunteering (tutoring peers, clean-up campaigns in local parks, or attending preschool centers, etc.). This strengthens the student's emotional maturity and academic interest. These experiences contribute to creating healthy attitudes toward work as well as discovering their talents. As a result, the students learn decision-making skills, discipline and improvement in their academic work. As documented by Irizarry (2006),

[...] by clarifying their work goals and discovering their possibilities, young people put great effort into acquiring the academic skills that enables them to achieve their goals (Irizarry *et al.*, 2006: 11).

The relationship that young people establish with a formal work experience is many times unstable and a source of great distress. On the one hand because of the great challenge to find work without sacrificing school (demands and schedule) and on the other retaining work when it is found because of lack of social and professional skills. School obligation, family responsibilities and adjustments to a formal work environment make for a fragile step towards the world of work. Therefore, the school needs to provide a transition into the world of work in order for the student to practice their social and academic skills and strengthen the «building blocks» of resilience, industry, initiative and autonomy.

Overall, Nuestra Escuela has created a type of «therapeutic community» to promote the attention to mental health issues associated with traumas (violence, abuse, others). As a result, all students, regardless of their emotional challenges, can receive the necessary attention, referrals and services. The progress made is summarized by Irizarry,

[...] The data shows that the therapeutic impact of Nuestra Escuela's psychosocial environment modifies students' behavior, feelings and thoughts in such a way that it reduces substance use, episodes of violence, the effect on them of experiences of abuse, which facilitates their retention and academic achievement. We could say that the psychosocial environment of the school is similar to the effect of a therapeutic community at such a

level that students who have been diagnosed with mental health conditions improve their self-esteem and their resilience to a level that when evaluated, despite discontinuing their treatment psychological-psychiatric, are in good social functioning and advancing in their academic achievement. [...] (Irizarry *et al.*, 2008: 13).

Nuestra Escuelas's praxis in this area corresponds to the critical consciences presented by Warner and Smith (in Benard, 1996) which helps create an awareness of the challenges, be they personal, societal or in this case organic to the individual due to the experiences of trauma or issues of mental health. Part of the critical consciousness factor contemplates the creation of strategies for overcoming them (Benard, 1996). Nuestra Escuela's approach to mental health is a concrete tool for the student's resilience.

## 8. Conclusions

This study intended to explore which factors are present in the decision to abandon school and which of these are related to factors of protection and risk and resilience. It also projected to know how one school addresses the building of resilience in the same population of students.

There are three conclusions that can be extracted from this analysis:

*First: The factors are not what they seem.* Although it is understood that risk factors include unwanted pregnancies, violence and drugs, for example, not always are they the sole defining factors in the decision-making. Data in this study showed that factors associated with their academic work were a bigger determinant in their decision than other risk factors. However, a combination of factors also has a direct impact on the academic improvement of the student, of which absenteeism and class-cutting are only symptoms.

The implications for the Alternative School are a call to focus on the factors that motivate and reinforce industry and problem solving skills as a mean to ameliorate the effect that students may encounter when faced with academic work that over time becomes increasingly challenging.

*Second: The Role of the Caring Adult/Teacher Remains Critical.* Of the primary protective factors discussed in the paper (opportunities for participation and high expectations), the role of the caring adults/teachers is key in the development of many of the protective factors in resilience. Outside of the family, teachers are the most influential positive role models in the lives of resilient youth. As seen in Nuestra Escuela, the classes, activities and self-improvement workshops focus on building trust between students and teachers. Knowing the students well personally impacts the interventions and overall learning. The results benefit the entire school community.

Young people will work harder and do things for people they love, trust and respect. (Werner and Smith, 1989 in Benard, 1996). Becoming a caring adult for a young person cannot be part of the program or an operation strategy, but rather a way in which to relate



within the school community that communicates concern, understanding and respect (Benard, 1996).

*Third: Resilience as a model for Alternative Schools.* The risk factors for students in the Alternative Schools may be reduced, but many of the hazards and exposure to risk still remain in the home and community. Therefore, Alternative Schools have to develop the model based on concrete resilience practices, activities and school policies to help guide their work into the future. Alternative Schools are up to the challenge to begin to refer to resilience as a tool with which to strengthen and optimize the student's life skills.

In order to understand the paradigm of resilience, these schools have to monitor the various and changing manifestations of the protective and risk factors. Risk factors in particular, may take different shapes and these may change with the trends in the social and economic profile of the community in which the students live. In order to monitor these changes in risk factors, the need arises to continue to study resilience in this youth population and the schools' response to this need. The administration of a resilience scale or survey in the Alternative Schools would shed more light on the perspective of students and provide information on the progress of the school's effort to build resilience within the school community. The results would greatly benefit the Alternative School leadership and the CASA Project in their future decision-making. In addition, the administration of an additional survey to expand the items posed in this survey to include the reasons why they have returned to school, via the Alternative School.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the cooperation of Mr. Israel Cruz, Director of the CASA Project of the Department of Education of Puerto Rico, Dr. Rafael Irizarry and Ms. Helvia Irizarry Quintero.

#### PROCESO EDITORIAL • EDITORIAL PROCEESS INFO

Recibido: 5/11/2016      Aceptado: 19/12/2016

#### CÓMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO • HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

Barrientos Soto, Andrea (2016) Alternative Education and the Development of Resilience in Youth Who Have Abandoned School in Puerto Rico, *Revista de Paz y Conflictos*, Vol. 9(2), pp. 223-243.

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